

LSD, Spirituality, and the Creative Process

by Marlene Dobkin De Rios and Oscar Janiger

reviewed by **Brandy Doyle** • brandy@maps.org

MAPS sponsored a forty year follow-up study to Dr. Janiger's LSD research which was published in the Spring 1999 issue of the *MAPS Bulletin*. See: www.maps.org/news-letters/v09n1/09107jan.html.

Ah, the good old days. As scientists face hurdle after hurdle to obtain approval for research with psychedelics, it's worthwhile to look back at a time before the War on Drugs, when studying the actions and even benefits of these substances was much easier. Marlene Dobkin De Rios's new book, *LSD, Spirituality, and the Creative Process*, tells the story of Oscar Janiger's pioneering research, in which over 900 people were administered LSD.

Last year I had the opportunity to speak with De Rios about the story of Dr. Janiger's work and her views on psychedelics and culture. A therapist as well as a medical anthropologist, Marlene Dobkin De Rios met Dr. Janiger in the 1960s and remained close to him until he passed away in 2001. For six months before his death, she visited with him to work on this book, and after his death she inherited the files from his research, which had never before been comprehensively published.

THE WORK OF OSCAR JANIGER

Janiger, a psychiatrist at UC Irvine, engaged in a study of the subjective effects of LSD on a broad range of people. He hoped to discover some essential characteristics of the LSD experience. Unlike most researchers, Janiger wanted to create a "natural" setting, reasoning that there was nothing especially neutral about a laboratory or hospital room. He rented a house outside of LA, in which his subjects could have a relatively non-directed experience in a supportive environment.

Janiger's study began in 1954 and continued until it was shut down in 1962. About six years later he conducted a follow-up that analyzed questionnaires from about 200 participants. MAPS conducted another follow-up after 40 years, reaching 45 individuals. In both follow-ups, most people found the experience pleasant overall; however, there was wide variation within each group when people were asked if the experience had lasting benefits. Janiger's follow-up noted that those in therapy had a high rate of positive response, and they felt that the experience was beneficial overall, but they found the experience much less pleasant than other participants who were not in therapy. (Many of Janiger's subjects had been referred by their therapists to the study.) In the 40-year follow-up, one-third reported persisting beneficial changes, and interestingly, those who had been in therapy when they began the study were much more likely to report lasting benefits.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

In one of the most interesting sections of the book, De Rios discusses the question of LSD and creativity. Early in Janiger's project, an art professor in the study made a drawing of a Hopi kachina doll that was in the house. The artist found that LSD had a profound influence on his style, and suggested that Janiger invite other artists to explore this change. Janiger began a separate sub-study on creativity, turning one room of the house into a studio. He invited professional artists, writers, and musicians to participate, eventually including about 100 people. De Rios's book includes a section of color images of the kachina doll, which was painted by many of the artists before and during their LSD sessions.

In 1971, art historian Carl Hertel examined 250 "before" and "after" drawings and paintings created during Janiger's project. While he didn't find the LSD-inspired art to be either superior or inferior to the artists' typical work, he did note a pattern in the changed styles. According to De Rios, Hertel felt that the paintings created under the influence of LSD were "more abstract, symbolic, brighter, more emotional and aesthetically adventuresome, and non-representational, and they tended to use all available space on the canvas."

De Rios offers a thoughtful discussion of the implications of these changes, pointing out that Janiger did not feel that LSD enhanced creativity specifically, but rather gave people access to parts of their brain normally unavailable, offering a new perspective. He didn't believe that LSD would make an artist out of someone who was not. Rather, it offered the artists an exploratory tool.

In addition to the color plates, De Rios includes a number of other materials from Janiger's files, including an appendix of subjects' poetry and a case study of identical twins. While the poetry isn't especially illuminating, the numerous volunteer narratives (both throughout the text and in a separate appendix) are useful in illustrating the breadth of possible LSD experiences.

De Rios does an excellent job in separating out her views from those of Janiger, offering both his views and her own perspective as an anthropologist and therapist. In the chapter on spirituality, for example, she notes that Janiger did not believe LSD is essentially spiritual. He considered the 24% of participants who reported having a spiritual experience as an *anomaly* in the data. She differs, however, arguing that with low doses, 24% is *remarkably high* for participants who were in a neutral setting and not prepared for a spiritual experience.

CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

In my talk with De Rios I had the chance to learn more about her views on the cross-cultural use of psychedelics. She has focused on psychedelic experience in her work both as an anthropologist and a psychologist. She wrote her anthropology dissertation on ayahuasca and traditional folk healing in Peru in the 1960s, before much work on ayahuasca had been done. In the 1990s, she did quantitative and qualitative research on teens and ayahuasca in Brazil, funded by the Heffter Institute. She has worked with altered states in her psychology practice using biofeedback, hypnosis, and meditation. She has also been a prolific writer, publishing four books and almost 300 papers.

De Rios describes herself as a “psychedelic anthropologist,” though she has had just two psychedelic experiences—one with ayahuasca and one with LSD. She jokingly calls herself a voyeur, someone who has spent her career watching others take drugs. From her perspective, it is the ritual structure and the social context that make psychedelics a valuable part of other cultures. “Psychedelic experiences in American society are highly idiosyncratic,” she explained, saying that she sees the only universals in American psychedelic experience as “pains, aches, and complaints.” In other words, she finds that without ritual structure, psychedelic use is unlikely to be beneficial.

De Rios described one use of psychedelics in traditional cultures as a rite of passage for a community’s young people. As children become adults, sharing a structured psychedelic experience allows a group of young people to bond together, making them more firmly a part of the society.

I asked De Rios if she could imagine psychedelics more integrated into our own society, in a future in which

these substances were no longer criminalized. She agreed, saying, “If these substances weren’t illegal, shamans would emerge.” She did not, however, believe that this beneficial integration could take place without the inclusion of a sanctioned leader. In her words, “My studies in cross-cultural perspectives always show the role of a guide.”

RESEARCH

This guide, however, need not be a shaman. De Rios believes strongly in the therapeutic value of psychedelics, and the sanctioned use she envisions could occur in this context. From Oscar Janiger’s broad study and others, she concludes that substances like LSD can reliably be beneficial. “The implication is that you control the environment, select the subjects carefully, monitor their behavior, and prepare them, and you’ll see very positive outcomes.”

Psychedelic drugs could be helpful for a number of conditions, she continued, “especially things I find so hard to treat, like addiction, alcoholism, personality disorders.” However, she also sees psychedelics as not only treating illnesses, but even enhancing life. LSD, she said, “opens new realms of experience, new knowledge, aesthetic inspiration, and religious and revelatory insights.” These benefits would help not only the individual, but the scientific world as well. “There is a real role for LSD in medicine and cognitive science,” she said.

As we discussed these possibilities for the future of research with LSD and other psychedelics, De Rios told me, “I hope it happens in my lifetime.” So do we. •

Marlene De Rios and Roger Rumrill are writing a book on drug tourism in the Amazon. If you have any experiences with this that you would like to share, please contact Marlene de Rios at septrion@aol.com. For more information, see www.MarleneDobkinDeRios.com (case sensitive URL).



Images from
*LSD, Spirituality,
and the Creative Process*
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and Oscar Janiger

LEFT:
An artist’s first rendition of
the deer kachina doll,
produced prior to
ingesting LSD.

RIGHT:
The same artist’s rendering
of the doll while under the
influence of LSD.

